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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - August 24, 2005

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

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Human Rights  
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#### Authorities Annul Two Weekly Papers' Registration

12. On August 22, Minsk authorities deregistered Denpress (i.e. the company that produces the independent weekly Den) after alleging the company had not operated for six months. Company Head Nikolay Markevich plans to fight the decision by claiming that Denpress did publish an edition of Den on May 26 but that authorities seized the print run of just under 2,000 copies 40km from the Russian border. Authorities claimed the May 26 edition did not count, since it did not reach subscribers.

13. On August 24, Minsk authorities also deregistered Press-Service, publisher of the independent weekly Kuryer iz Borisova, stating that its Charter lacked several clauses required by media law. The court's decision surprised the staff since the paper had operated without problems for three years.

#### Prominent World Leaders Condemn Lukashenko's Practices

14. On August 20, a number of prominent world figures signed an open letter condemning Lukashenko's crackdown on democracy and independent organizations, including religious establishments, NGOs, political parties and the non-state press. The letter called on the EU, U.S. and other democratic countries to form a common strategy to support democracy building within Belarus. Signatories to the letter include former Czech Republic president Vaclav Havel, former Irish president Mary Robinson, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and financier George Soros.

#### Journalist Harassed by KGB after Trip Abroad

15. Upon his return from a familiarization trip to the Czech Republic, KGB officers on August 17 interrogated freelance journalist and NGO activist Aleksandr Rautenko about the purpose of his trip. Rautenko traveled to Prague representing a coalition of Svetlogorsk-based NGOs addressing education, cultural and social security issues. The NGOs plan to protest the interrogation on the grounds that foreign travel is a constitutional right.

#### Websites Blocked

16. Following the August 15 KGB raid on Trety Put (Third Way) students, unknown "Belarusian patriots" hacked into the United Civic Party's (UCP's) website to alter its

home page. In addition, the websites for Malady Front, Human Rights Alliance and the Belarusian Association of Journalists were hacked and shut down.

#### Polish Editor Banned from Leaving Belarus

¶7. On August 19, the Belarusian court prohibited "Magazyn Polski" Editor-in-Chief, and Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) spokesman, Andrzej Poczobut from leaving Belarus. The court ruled that Poczobut did not pay a BYR 5.1 million [USD 2,372] fine that he received after participating in an unauthorized protest. Mr. Poczobut said that he intended to pay the fine, but "was arrested and not physically able to pay anything."

#### Authorities Liquidated Evangelical Reformed Church

¶8. On August 22, Minsk city court de-registered the Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Union Church for lack of a legal address. [Note: this is a common method the GOB uses to close NGOs, media outlets, parties and churches.] Lacking adequate funds to secure a proper location, Church leader Leonid Lipen had refused to re-register the church as required by law, and demands the government return the denomination's churches and historical buildings.

#### Skrebets Formally Charged

¶9. On August 23, authorities formally charged former Respublika MP Sergey Skrebets for defrauding Belarusbank of more than USD 500,000 in loans while he was the director general of the BelBabyevsky Trading House in 2001. Skrebets denies the accusation, stating that the Trading House received the loans after he had already resigned from the company.

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Civil Society  
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#### Buy Belarusian, Read Belarusian

¶10. Effective July 18, the Belarusian Council of Ministries created a list of foreign-produced items that can no longer be purchased with government funds. The list of items -- including books, canned goods, and other goods -- is for official use and has not been shared with the public. Libraries, which rely entirely on government funding to purchase books, have already started to feel the effects of this decree since most of their books are printed in other CIS countries. The Ministry of Culture has sent a letter to the Ministries of Finance and Economy requesting guidance on how to handle the impending information gap.

#### Domestic Adoptions Increase

¶11. On August 23, Minister of Education Aleksandr Radkov reported to President Lukashenko that domestic adoptions have increased 11% over the past year. This result has been part of a serious initiative to ensure that Belarusian families adopt Belarusian children. While the MOE claims adoptions of Belarusian children by foreigners are still possible, the new process introduced this year is very difficult. No foreign adoptions have taken place under the new rule. Lukashenko has stated publicly that his goal is to completely eliminate foreign adoptions.

#### Love and Marriage

¶12. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis, the number of marriages in Belarus has risen almost 20% since last year, whereas the number of divorces has not slowed at all. Pre- and ante-nuptial

agreements have become popular addendums to marriage ceremonies.

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Economics  
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#### Salaries Up

¶13. The Ministry of Finance reports that June's mean monthly salary, BYR 476,400 [USD 222], was up 21.9% over last year. Nurses and agricultural workers received the lowest average monthly salaries, BYR 244,700 and 246,300 [USD 105 and USD 115 respectively]. Oil sector workers fared the best with an average monthly wage of BYR 993,700 [USD 462].

#### Largest EU Project in Belarus in Jeopardy

¶14. Delays in issuing proper licenses to contractors could jeopardize the progress of the EU funded construction of cargo terminal Kozlovichi-2 on the Polish-Belarusian border. This cargo terminal would double processing capacity at that border crossing. The European Commission has already transferred funds to Belarus to cover construction through the end of the year, but if the bureaucracy continues to create delays, the EC may halt subsequent funding.

#### EU Takes Steps to Suspend Trade Benefits for Belarus

¶15. On August 22 the European Commission initiated the process to suspend EU Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for Belarus unless the GOB brings its labor legislation and the country's commitments into compliance with international norms within the next 14 months. If Belarus fails to comply, estimates of the cost to the GOB range from EUR 100-280 million annually. Belarus believes it could respond to the EU decision, however, by redirecting its exports to America or Asia.

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Anti-U.S.  
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#### Math Textbook Teaches Anti-Western Equations

¶16. The Ministry of Education recently published a new edition of a popular mathematical textbook. This textbook, which is used in junior high academic competitions, contains sample "mathematical" equations such as "US + NATO = WAR" and "NATO + GO HOME = PEACE."

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Belarusian Bilateral Relations  
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#### Outgoing Ukrainian Ambassador Offered New Employment in Belarus

¶17. On August 19, Ukrainian Ambassador to Belarus Petro Shapoval departed Belarus. Two days before his departure, President Lukashenko invited Ambassador Shapoval to return to Belarus, where Lukashenko would find him employment.

#### Border Incident Settled

¶18. On August 17, the last of the detained Ukrainian mushroom and berry gatherers returned home. Belarusian police had arrested nineteen Ukrainians who had illegally crossed the border into Belarus to gather fruits and vegetables. Questions about whether they entered Belarus deliberately or at Belarusian police

gunpoint arose, but the ensuing investigation proved that the Ukrainians entered Belarus unintentionally.

#### Belarusian & Venezuelan Legislatures Pledge Cooperation

¶19. Following his meeting with Venezuelan National Assembly Member Saul Ortega last month at the World Youth Festival in Venezuela, MP and head of the Belarusian Republican Youth Movement Mikhail Orda announced that the legislatures of Venezuela and Belarus have agreed to work together to promote bilateral political, economic and cultural contacts.

#### Neighbors Discuss Policy to Belarus

¶20. On August 19, vice speaker of Lithuania's Seimas Ceslovas Jurisas announced that in September, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly will discuss the condition of Belarus' ethnic minorities. Jurisas also asked the European Commission to address the GOB's attempts to control the leadership of the Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP). He called on neighboring countries to make known their views on the UBP conflict. Polish Prime Minister Marek Belka suggested that Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Ukraine coordinate policies regarding Belarus.

#### Belarusian Auto Plant to Open Office in Cuba

¶21. Responding to Cuba's growing interest in Belarusian automobiles, Mogilev Automobile Plant (MoAZ) announced its plans to open a representative office in Cuba. MoAZ has already signed a contract with Cuba to produce 42 mine dump trucks. MoAZ and the GOC have also discussed opening a service center and spare parts warehouse.

#### ----- Quote of the Week -----

¶22. On August 19, President Lukashenko congratulated the farmers of the Grodno region on collecting 1 million tons of grain:

"One million tons are a real victory, but I expect you to gather 500,000 tons more... I will suspend the labor discipline decree for ten minutes and propose a toast to the Grodno Region farmers."

PHLIPOT